

Austrey in the Great Civil War (Part 1)

Increasing literacy was one of a number of factors which helped to promote political change in the parish. Besides giving access to ideas which challenged the established order, literacy provided individual villagers with opportunities to formulate their own opinions and thereby play a more active part in sectarian controversy. The process was accelerated by the political turmoil between 1640 and 1660 which led to the emergence of political and religious divisions.

The first signs of the inhabitants' involvement in national politics came after the eleven year period in which Charles I attempted to reign without Parliament. On 3rd and 4th May, 1641 both houses of Parliament endorsed an oath of Protestation, to uphold 'the true, Reformed, Protestant religion', which affected to give support both to the king and 'the power and privileges of Parliament'. The oath itself was sufficiently ambiguous to embrace many shades of political and religious opinion. It was, in effect, a test of religious and political orthodoxy, one of a number of solemn declarations, vows and covenants circulated around this time to drum up support for one or other of the parliamentary factions. The lists of those who enthusiastically subscribed to the oath - 42 signatories, or about a third of the eligible males in the parish - is revealing as it suggests that only a third of the inhabitants were interested in taking sides in the conflict. The signatories appear to have taken the oath on their own initiative between five and six o'clock on the morning of 19th September, 1641, before waiting for it to be extended and made compulsory.

While the Austrey inhabitants may have been divided in their loyalties, a more plausible explanation for the small number of signatories is that the list is incomplete as a result of deliberate or accidental expurgation. An analysis of the signatories appears to support this theory, since they represent a broad cross-section of the inhabitants rather than any particular social strata or interest group. Those who signed the Protestation were the vicar, John Prior, and two local gentlemen, Henry Kendall and Thomas Willington, nine yeomen, thirteen husbandmen, six craftsmen (a baker, a wheelwright, a joiner, a carpenter and two weavers), and four day-labourers. The exact status of the remaining six signatories cannot be determined, but they seem to have been smallholders or cottage craftworkers. It is particularly interesting that three of those who signed the petition were later listed on the muster rolls for the parliamentary garrison at Maxstoke under Henry Kendall's command.

Evidence relating to the 'politicisation' of Austrey's inhabitants is difficult to obtain. Up to the outbreak of the war most of the gentry, with the notable exception of the Kendalls, were hesitant and uncertain in their loyalties. Historians have in the past offered misleadingly precise explanations for gentry decisions to support one side or the other based upon economic or 'class' interest. The conventional arguments revolve around Lawrence Stone's theory of a contest between factions within the ruling elite, Peter Zagorin's idea of 'the court' versus 'the country' and Brian Manning's suggestion that the civil war was a struggle for a greater level of participation in government by the common people. Professor Alan Everitt and J.S. Morrill examined the composition of county committees and local power networks in an attempt to discover regional patterns and motivations, finding that the gentry were often preoccupied with issues within their native county. Attempts have also been made to draw the lines between moderates who wished to preserve the traditional order within the counties and extremists seeking to politicise the county community.

J.S. Morrill argued that there was no common consensus on the issues at stake; most country people, torn between conflicting loyalties, wavered in support of one side or another. As the conflict widened and threatened to engulf them they became increasingly anxious to end the war itself as a first priority. This dilemma is articulated by the rector of Swepstone who favoured the royalists 'before men could well recollect themselves', then later shifted his loyalties to Parliament.

Sources and Notes

A.J. Fletcher, 'Petitioning and the Outbreak of the Civil War in Derbyshire', *DAJ*, 93 (1973), 33-44.77. W.R.O. Austrey register, DRB 41/8; Kendall was governor of Maxstoke from 21 Nov. 1643 to October 1645 cf. accounts for maintenance of garrison PRO SP 28/182.

L. Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529-1642* (London, 1972); P. Zagorin, *The Court and the Country* (London, 1969), 74-5; B. Manning, *The English People and the English Revolution, 1640-1649* (London, 1976).

A. Everitt, *County Community*, 15-17; The inhabitants were torn between 'two essential elements in their fundamental political cosmology': J.S. Morrill, *The Revolt of the Provinces* (London, 1976), 16; An example of parochial concerns is gentry opposition to Ship Money which had its origin in personal rather than constitutional interest: A. Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion*, 63-4. Calendar of the Committee for Compounding pg. 109; J.H. Pruett, *The Parish Clergy under the Later Stuarts*, pg. 11.

Taking sides

The contending explanations have forced further reappraisal of the issues. After careful sifting of the evidence it is now generally recognised that attitudes and alignments were far more complex than previously assumed. More attention is being given to the impact of social change at parish level, and in particular to the emergence of conflict between 'parish elites' and the common people whose aspirations and behaviour they increasingly sought to control.

In order to assess parochial responses to the crisis in Austrey, it is necessary to consider the immediate threats that confronted the inhabitants. First and foremost was the royalist garrison at Ashby, bolstered by Prince Rupert's 800 cavaliers, which argued caution to the most resolute parliamentarians. Henry Hastings had sought to take advantage of Parliament's hesitancy in implementing its militia ordinance in Leicestershire by reading the commission of array at Loughborough on June 27th, 1642. However the announcement by Giovanni Guistinian, the Venetian ambassador, that the county had 'delivered complete submission to his majesties' commands' was precipitous; Hastings' failure either to mobilise the militia or to capture the county magazine at Newarke (spirited away by Lord Stamford to his seat at Bradgate), severely weakened his grip on the county. For most of the earlier part of the war neither the king nor parliament had effective control over the border region. Both parties resorted to marauding and intimidation of the rural population from fortified garrisons. In 1644 the parliamentarian Sir John Gell, 'pestered with petty garrisons' in the vicinity of King's Mills (15 miles north of Austrey), complained that the local villagers were afraid to assist him because of the threat of reprisals from Ashby. Hastings gave a dramatic display of his ability to carry out punitive raids in March 1644 when he is reported to have rounded up nearly 100 prisoners suspected of Parliamentary leanings, locked them in the church at Hinckley and threatened to hang any that dared to sign the Parliamentary covenant. As Gell himself observed in a letter to Lord

Grey on July 10th, 1644 neither the persons nor the goods of the inhabitants well-affected to the Parliament are secure in any part of the country.

The parish clergy were particularly vulnerable. Hastings' men paid scant respect to clerical immunity. At Loughborough, for example, only the hostility of the town's womenfolk prevented his followers from dragging the preacher from his pulpit during a sermon. The parliamentary troops were little better. In 1645, for example, when they entered Coleorton near Ashby, they had the younger Thomas Pestell, a royalist minister, 'hoisted upon a poor jade with an halter... an whipped'. His father, the vicar of Packington, drew up a petition complaining of the cruel treatment of 'a minister not in armes, nor offering the least resistance', begging 'to intreat we no more be troden on'. The threat of royalist reprisal continued to discourage the more outspoken supporters of Parliament until March 1646 when the Ashby garrison finally surrendered after a long siege, an event heralded as 'a great mercy and mighty preservation of the peace and tranquility of all adjacent parts'.

Sources and Notes

C. Hill, 'Parliament and People in seventeenth century England', *Past and Present*, 92 (1981), pp. 101-24.

VCH Leics.II, 112; An observer relates that 'Hastings caused the drums to be beaten, and colours displayed; and marched to the great terror of the people': Nichols III, Appendix iv, pp. 25-26.

Calendar of State Papers Venetian, xxvii, pp. 65, 84.

Sir John Gell to Earl of Essex, Feb. 1644: Nichols III, 737.

Nichols III, Appendix iv, pp. 33, 36, 893, 737-8

At the beginning of the war a great many of the midland gentry were cautious and undecided in their loyalties. Although there were a few hard liners the majority were uncommitted, wavering in their support of one side or the other, or neutral. The lines were drawn by family and regional loyalties, each county or region having its own distinctive pattern of alignments. In Derbyshire the parliamentary militants aligned with Sir John Gell, the commissioner for the militia, while the royalists joined the great landholders like Sir John Harpur of Swarkeston, who declared for the king. In Leicestershire allegiances cut across social rank and religious affiliation to divide between the representatives of two traditional rivals, Henry Hastings of Ashby and Lord Grey of Groby. In Warwickshire meanwhile parliamentarian sympathisers joined Lord Brook, the lord lieutenant of the country, while the more fragmented royalists attached themselves to local garrisons or went south to join the king's forces at Oxford and Banbury.

The principal sources for determining local allegiances are the county committee lists, sequestration papers drawn up to punish scandalous ministers and delinquent royalists, family papers, and muster rolls. Often, however, the evidence is contradictory.

Despite owing his appointment to the crown, the vicar, John Prior, appears to have avoided taking sides in the dispute between King and Parliament. His cautious political stance is emphasised by contrast with the activities of his more outspoken colleagues at Orton and Packington who openly preached against Parliament from the pulpit. Relations between the clergy and their flocks had become especially volatile. Roger Porter's pro-royalist sermons provoked such an uproar in Orton that he was forced to flee to Ashby for safety. Thomas Pestell of Packington also appears to have thrown in his lot with Hastings; his parishioners later accused him of plundering his neighbours and

letting the church tithes rot on the ground. These were extreme examples. Moderate Presbyterian attitudes to the conflict are better articulated by Immanuel Bourne, vicar of Ashover in Derbyshire, who recalls that

In the beginning of the year 1642 when I saw both sydes bent on war and destruction, I made up my mynde to part with neither, but to attend to my two parishes and leave them to fight it out.

A few of their gentry neighbours were less circumspect. Sir John Repington of Amington and William Roberts of Sutton Cheney, for example, attached themselves to the Ashby garrison early in the war. Thomas Leving of Grendon, who owned lands in Austrey, was heavily involved in the political conflict, as pre-war escheator for ship money in 1640, committee muster-master and a petitioner fomenting 'scandal' against the county committee in 1643. Yet, despite being ejected from the garrison at Coventry as 'a constant stirrer up of strife and Mutinye', Leving identified with the moderate cause. Richard Dudley of Swepstone, 'marched with his sovereign under the banner of Truth' before being brought under the 'Oliverish lash'. He was Captain of a troop at Ashby but surrendered before 1st December, 1645 and quietly resided at his own house until the war ended, the committee fining him £106 as a delinquent. In the adjacent parish of Appleby. the younger Charles Moore's marriage to the rector's daughter around 1644 was one of the factors which helped to ensure stability there during these difficult times. If either the Moores or the Moulds did harbour strong political views they avoided any overt attempt to give support to either side. Sir Wolstan Dixie's magnanimous voluntary gift of £1,835 to the king in 1641 was not followed up by active support, probably because he had divided loyalties.

Sources and Notes

J. Vicars, *Dei Anglican Magnalia* (London, 1740), 102; Cal. State Papers Venetian, xxvii, 249. VCH Leics. II, 109-10; Warwickshire gentry alignments are discussed in D.F. Mosler, 'The "Other Civil War": internecine politics in the Warwickshire county committees, 1642-1659', *Midland History*, iv (1981), 58-71. A.Hughes, 'County Community', loc. cit., 63-5. A.J. Fletcher, 'Petitioning in Derbyshire', loc.cit., 35-6. Nichols IV, 850; Porter was three times imprisoned and frequently plundered for his Royalist sympathies: Walker, *Sufferings*, 241-2; CCC, I, III. Bourne's letter cited in A.J. Fletcher, 'Petitioning in Derbys.', loc. cit., 41. Repington, who was in the Commission of Array, compounded Amington manor worth £400 p.a.; Roberts, who pleaded that he went to Ashby merely to see his kindred and to evade his creditors was fined £78 by the committee; CCC II, 962-3, 1290. Leving was imprisoned by the Commons in June, 1643: (SP 16/510/119), A.L. Hughes, thesis, 372-3; Dudley in B.L. Harleian 2043 No. 2, ff. 38, 40; CCC III, 1879. T. Heywood described John Moore of Bank Hall as an opportunist, 'a man always acting with the dominant party, Puritan, Presbyterian, or Independent; signing with the majority, protestation, covenant or engagement': *The Moore Rental*, Chetham Society, XII (1847), iii, V, xiv-xxii. Dixie had a foot in both camps. He is said to have had the king's confidence but at the same time his second wife was a daughter of Sir Thomas Haselrigg and one of his own daughters married Thomas Cromwell, a major in the Parliamentary army. Cromwell himself petitioned against his misuse of power. Nichols IV, 497-8; Calendar of the Committee for Compounding, pg 104.

